

Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

Theology Faculty Research and Publications

Theology, Department of

1-1-2012

The Struggle against Racism and the Global Horizon of Christian Hope

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator

Marquette University, agbonkhianmeghe.orobator@marquette.edu

Published version. "The Struggle against Racism and the Global Horizon of Christian Hope," in *Ecclesiology and Exclusion: Boundaries of Being and Belonging in Postmodern Times*. Eds. Dennis Doyle, Timothy J. Furry and Pascal D. Bazzell. Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2012: 125-129. [Permalink](#). © 2012 Orbis Books. Used with permission.

The Struggle against Racism and the Global Horizon of Christian Hope

Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator

In this brief presentation I intend to offer some comments on Bryan Massingale's book *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* under the overarching theme of ecclesiology and exclusion.¹ His analysis of racism proffers a critical hermeneutical tool for understanding the reality of exclusion as it operates in church and in society. My comments are limited to three broad areas: (1) the global phenomenon of racism, (2) the limitation of Catholic social teaching, and (3) a critique of the means for overcoming racism. I begin with an anecdote.

"The two Africans were simply minding their business." That's how the national press of a European country reported an incident that happened recently that involved a Jesuit colleague and me. My colleague and I were taking a walk to catch a bus to his place of work. As we entered a narrow alley, we noticed a policeman coming from the opposite direction. He looked amiable, even wearing what looked like a friendly, inviting smile. But what came out of his mouth was neither friendly nor inviting. "Africans, go back to Africa! You don't belong in this country. Black people, go back home!"

At the time of the incident I was shocked, dumbfounded, and angry. However, what aggravated these feelings was not the unwillingness of the policeman to apologize, even when I insisted; rather, it was the comments posted on the website of the newspaper that reported on the incident. The comments were sarcastic, vitriolic, and racist. The common thread running through them was a vilification of one race for surreptitiously seeking to benefit from or even jeopardize the hard-earned privileges, advantages, and entitlements of another. Rereading these comments I have no doubt that they confirm Massingale's central thesis that "race matters." When he argues that racism is an archetypal cultural phenomenon and the United States of America's deepest national obsession, I can understand why. Yet, in light of my experience, it is safe to assert that racism is alive not only

in America but also elsewhere in the world as well. Simply put, racism is a global phenomenon. It may be socially active, economically prevalent, and historically contextualized in the U.S. society, but it is a reality that is present in the world.

To come back to the anecdote, for this policeman to be disabused of his racist and xenophobic mind-set, it would take more than just an apology—albeit he would later apologize in writing—because such an attitude is undergirded by and firmly rooted in a culture or a set of meanings and symbols that shape the worldview of individuals and their societies and orient their actions. Besides, the continent to which the policemen commanded me and my colleague to return is the object of historical prejudices, media stereotypes, and facile generalizations. To put it bluntly, it is the “heart of darkness.” This “dark continent” is routinely associated with all things inferior, hideous, and underdeveloped. This further demonstrates the point that the tendency to equate black with inferior and white with superior is not a national obsession for the United States alone, as Massingale points out. It poses a formidable challenge to peoples of color all over the world.

With regard to the role of the Roman Catholic Church, the arguments in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* are compelling in showing that the church is a latecomer in the struggle against racism. More disturbing is Massingale’s demonstration of how racism has operated historically within the Catholic Church in myriad subtle and not-so-subtle ways. The scandal of this realization is further compounded when one takes into account several centuries of the tradition of Catholic social teaching. The latter has been described as our best-kept secret; however, in regard to how the church deals with the sin of racism, Massingale is right to argue that it is our best-kept silence. Or, put differently, the church’s concern for racism pales in comparison to its passion for abortion/pro-life issues and sexual ethics. Racism does not yet appear as a theological and ethical priority for the church.

One could adduce several reasons for the lack of a more proactive stance by the church vis-à-vis the evil of racism. As mentioned above, the indications are that racism also operates within the structures of the church. If this is true, and there is no reason to doubt Massingale’s conviction that it is, one could hardly expect the church to turn voluntarily against itself. Rooting out the evil of racism implies eradicating a culture of unjustly acquired and violently maintained advantages and privileges, dominance, and entitlement. It also implies the transformation of an entire social system that pivots on racism as its dominant and defining culture. Many an institution like the church would find such a radical transformation threatening.

Ironically, there are Catholic resources for racial reconciliation. In light of the foregoing, a prerequisite for applying these resources would be an honest self-critique by the church. This would mean a critical look at some of its practices and teachings that either underestimate or condone the seriousness and urgency of the problem of racism. To combat this evil, it is not enough to issue statements and denouncements. A threefold social, theological, and ethical analysis would allow the church to listen to and hear the voices of victims, while effecting a deep and thorough examination of conscience in regard to its teachings and practices.

The sacramental resources for this task are not lacking. Christianity offers a variety of options that include a radical conversion via a self-emptying (*kenosis*) of sinful attachments, the baptismal incorporation into the body of Christ where all are recognized as equal, and the inclusion of all at the Eucharistic table of fellowship. This offers the possibility of creating an alternative set of meanings and symbols, expressed in confessions of faith or creeds that are nonracist and that prioritize unity, diversity, solidarity, responsibility, a preferential option for the poor, and reconciliation.

Outside of the church, how shall we overcome this evil of racism in society? Massingale makes an impassioned and compelling argument for two practical tools: "lament" and "compassion," which are accessible to both the victim and the privileged. Several illustrations of the former exist in scripture, however a more poignant example can be found in African American spirituals; there can be no denying the strident and haunting quality of lament embodied in spirituals. What poses problems, however, is Massingale's position that as an effective means of confronting the evil of racism, lament transcends logic and reason. If that is true, then it raises the following questions: How can it appeal beyond the borders of emotions? How could emotions alone be compelling? To take a simple example, how do we hear persistent wailing and lamentation? Is it not the case that their shrill tones easily disintegrate into a form of whining, complaining, and nagging in the ears of listeners?

It is easy to become inured to lament and for it to become a negligible irritant. Victims of racism have been lamenting for centuries to rather limited effect—otherwise Massingale would have no need to write a book on it in the twenty-first century! Transposed to the wider context of global historical geopolitical relations, like the biblical Rachel of old, we have lamented unceasingly the exploitation of the global south by the global north, the oppression of the poor by the rich, the subjugation of women by men, and so on. Yet the signs of compassion and solidarity have been few and far between—as elusive as the Parousia! If lament has not changed the status quo in so many centuries, what guarantee is there that it would in our day and age? Or do we simply need to keep increasing the decibels of lament?

Compassion, on the other hand, as Massingale argues, is modeled on the example of Jesus of Nazareth in the gospels. It is capable of transcending artificial and unjust boundaries. Ultimately, compassion places all of us at the level of our shared humanity and begets solidarity. Rather than being a fleeting feeling of pity, it stems from the depth of discontent with socioeconomic, cultural, and political situations that dehumanize a section of the human family in order to safeguard the privileges of another on account of skin color. Yet it remains unclear how human beings begin to cultivate and imbibe the quality of compassion in the construction of socioeconomic relationships, especially when they tend to privilege a particular social or racial group to the detriment of others.

In view of the limitations of this twin methodology of lament and compassion, I believe that the idea of struggle—that fundamental marker of the cultural identity of African Americans—needs to be more radical. It needs to reach to the roots of the problem and extirpate them completely. Struggle, however, involves an antagonist and a protagonist; it involves dispute and contestations, claims and counterclaims. This realization throws up the problem of the inevitability of violence attendant on the desire of one group to maintain its privilege and of another to attain its humanity. In light of this realization, I share Massingale's insightful view that the struggle for racial justice is a vocation for prophets—men and women, black, brown, white—who believe enough in the possibility of a universal table of fellowship and an inclusive beloved community to give up their lives for it.

Furthermore, Massingale is right to argue that creating a race-neutral society falls short of an adequate solution and the ultimate vision of a racially just society. To adopt Dalton's categories, a society of Beigians (where racial difference has been eliminated) or Proportians (where resources are allocated proportionately on the basis of color) remains a racially imbalanced society. What is needed is the radical dismantling of the connection that ties together racial difference, power, privilege, and prestige. Racial reconciliation means eliminating this nexus. It is a task that requires courage and a fair amount of personal sacrifice and suffering.

At this point I would like to sound a note of caution. In the analysis of racism and its manifestations in church and society, Massingale advances what he calls the fundamental norm of African American ethics, namely, freedom and equality of all under God, founded on and animated by a vision of an all-inclusive table of fellowship and beloved community. It is easy to romanticize these values. To illustrate this point from a different but somewhat similar context, oftentimes, in African Christianity, theologians wax eloquent about the values of communion and fullness of life (a/k/a *ubuntu*) as the animating and dynamic principles of African ethics. Yet

we must admit the reality that more and more, to many Africans of the postcolonial generation, the talk about *ubuntu* or community for life sounds arcane, passé, and irrelevant to the pressing concerns and quests of Africans for development and survival in a globalized world.

This prompts me to ask the following questions: How relevant is Massingale's 'excavated' vision or fundamental norm of African American ethics to contemporary African Americans? If this vision or norm is transgenerational—passing from one generation to the other—what are the mechanisms of this transmission? Is it written in their DNA? How many of them know about and still celebrate this vision of inclusiveness and love? Or are these not mere vestiges of a dying culture, like recessive genes that are no longer able to respond to the challenges of our day and age? Who really cares about the welcome table or beloved community, *ubuntu*, community, life—apart from academics like Massingale, myself, and the rest?

Nonetheless, the vocation of a Catholic theologian, and in this context, a black scholar, is indispensable. I would argue that we must constantly feel the pulse and heartbeat of the community. And the weaker and more strained this pulse and this heartbeat, the more critical and imperative our lament and our truth telling to those structures in church and society that continue to sanction man's inhumanity to man in defense of racial privilege, status, power, and entitlement.

In this context, I would argue in agreement with Massingale that to be a theologian is to be possessed of a powerful vision of an alternative and possible world, a passion for a liberating truth, and a commitment to the struggle for its realization here and now in communion with and at the service of the community of faith. Therefore, to be possessed of this vision is to live in hope and to permanently resist any attempt to defer the dream of a reconciled community for all—black, brown, white, yellow. While this vocation would need to contend with and overcome several challenges, including bias, inadequate resources, and personal limitations (despair, depression, fear, and cowardice), and answer to the unrelenting demands of serious scholarship, it labors under a horizon of Christian hope that is not a cheap form of optimism. Only this kind of hope can serve as an unfailing guarantee of the pertinence of and joy in the struggle for racial justice and reconciliation in the church and in the world.

Notes

¹ Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).